

**Subject: Maylene Campbell**

**October 27, 2009; November 5, 2009**

**Interviewers: Traci Burton, Kalamazoo Central High School**

**Jess Herndon, Western Michigan University**

### **On Life in the South**

Maylene: ... if you went into a store to buy something, if I walked into a store and you walked in behind me, instead of waiting on me because I was waiting there first, they would wait on you, because they wanted the blacks to take the back seat. And if you went to a restaurant and wanted a hamburger, you couldn't go in and sit down and eat your hamburger, they would hand it to you out the back door.

Jess: So is everything still overtly segregated?

Maylene: Yes. Until I left it was still segregated, because I went to all black schools.

Jess: And was it all black schools by coincidence or by choice? Was it like the black kids go to this school?

Maylene: There wasn't any choice. That was the only choice you had. If you wanted to go to school you went to the black school, and if the school bus was...you could see the school bus go by and the white kids, they was going the same way you was going, but you had to walk, but they rode.

Jess: You weren't allowed to ride the school bus?

Maylene: Not then, until my grandfather bought a bus. Well, it wasn't really a bus, but a van or something. When you go to high school, which was about fifteen or twenty miles away, he bought a bus and my uncles would drive around and pick the kids up. They had certain spots, designated spots. He did that on his own. And he built the first school we had. They were having school in the church. This was before my times, but he donated land to the county for us to have a school. They built a school but it was our land, and then after the school closed we got the land back. But that was years later.

Jess: While growing up in the South, how aware were you of your race?

Maylene: Very

Jess: I mean, in the context of, compared to other people, you were a black woman in a racist America.

Maylene: Okay, well, I left there when I was 20, no 19, and it was a different because we couldn't go in a restaurant and buy food. You could buy...you had to go to the back door, you'd buy it and they'd hand it out the back door, and that was really different than what it is here now.

Jess: So when you were younger, how did you feel about it? Were you proud, confused, angry, just ignorant of it? What...like when you were a child?

Maylene: Well, I think I was mostly ignorant of it, because when you're raised one way you don't know anything different, but when I got older, I wouldn't go to back doors no more.

Jess: So, obviously, you experienced racism at the restaurants, how did you react to that?

Maylene: I don't think at the time I did react, because that's what everyone else was doing, they just following the lead.

Jess: So as you grew up your perception changed...

Maylene: Yes, very much.

Jess: Explain that.

Maylene: Okay, my perception changed when I went to New York and it wasn't like that. And I really didn't understand it. Like, when you walk into a store and you wanted to buy something, if a white person came in behind you they would wait on them first, down South. But in New York it wasn't...only place in Kalamazoo was one drugstore.

Jess: Did you ever go back to the South after you moved out?

Maylene: I went back to visit my grandparents and my aunts and uncles.

Jess: Was it still...was it before the civil rights, was it still racist down there?

Maylene: I really didn't go to no restaurants down there, in the stores it was a little better, but getting down there was bad, because if you want to get gas, you'd pull up to the gas station, and my husband would ask them to use the bathroom, and if they say you can't use the bathroom, we'd get in the car and go further. We wouldn't buy the gas.

### **On Life in Kalamazoo**

Traci: How was life in Kalamazoo different than what you expected?

Maylene: Well, I didn't expect it to be prejudiced. When we came here, I think in 1964, there was a drugstore, on the corner of Ransom and Burdick. You could go in, they had a fountain, or you could buy an ice cream or a soda or whatever you wanted, but you couldn't sit at the counter and eat it. You had to buy it and take it outside and eat it. So, that's when Martin Luther King was starting all the marches, and we marched on that drugstore.

Traci: Wow. So was it like a boycott at that drugstore?

Maylene: Yeah.

Jess: Was that the Van Avery Drugstore, is that what that was?

Traci: And you were a part of that?

Maylene: Yes.

Traci: And how did that make you feel, having to do that stuff like eat outside of the drugstore.

Maylene: Well I didn't like having to do it, felt like I was down South again. Well, he still didn't let us sit at the counter. He closed the store rather than let the black people sit at the counter.

Traci: Wow.

Traci: What was the racial composition of the neighborhoods at your different houses?

Maylene: Okay, when I moved there, there was three black families, and all the rest of the houses...about six houses was white. But I had no reaction, I didn't meet them at all, not until later years.

Traci: Did you ever sense any racism from them, or was it just no interaction?

Maylene: No interaction. They didn't see me and I didn't see them, just keep walkin'.

### **Comparing the Two**

Jess: Would you compare life in general, but also the racial tension in [hard to hear] to Kalamazoo?

Maylene: No, not really.

Jess: Where was it worse? Down in [hard to hear]?

Maylene: Okay, if you had to go to the bathroom, or you wanted a drink of water at a fountain, it says colored, and white, and I didn't find that here. They might have a separate thing, but it didn't say it.

Jess: So when you marched on the drugstore, were there any prominent figures there for the boycott? I mean any big activists...?

Maylene: No, not really. Not like Martin Luther King or nothing like that.

## **On the Van Avery March**

Jess: And you participated in the march?

Maylene: Yes, I participated in the march.

Jess: How long did it last?

Maylene: About three weeks, and sometimes they got less and more again, like on the weekend when nobody got to work they'd have more.

Jess: And did you go every day when they were marching?

Maylene: No, I couldn't go every day because I had kids.

Jess: When you were there, what was the atmosphere like?

Maylene: Like, okay, if we can't sit at the counter, we ain't goin' in there. We ain't gonna buy nothing. And if some black person came up there you'd pull them to the side and tell them to go somewhere else.

Jess: Did the police interfere ever?

Maylene: No.

Jess: So you guys were very controlled.

Maylene: Yes.

Jess: Did the boycott work? What came of it?

Maylene: Well he closed the drugstore.

Jess: And then when he re-opened it, because also there was some dispute over...he wouldn't hire a black boy to work there...

Maylene: Oh, no, there was no black people working there.